



FILE PHOTO: PETE YEE

**TIGHTENING UP** The Pandas need to clamp down on Saskatchewan's scorers this weekend.



FILE PHOTO: LAUREN STIEGLITZ

**MAKING LAYUPS** Lack of intensity has cost the Golden Bears some easy buckets this season.

## Alberta, Sask set for first-place showdowns

Crooks, Dutchak stand between Pandas and divisional top spot

PAUL OWEN  
Sports Editor

For the first time since the 2002/03 women's basketball season, the fourth-ranked Saskatchewan Huskies may not win the Canada West Central Division. When the Huskies (12-4) come to town this weekend to take on the sixth-ranked Pandas (12-4), first place and a first-round playoff bye will be on the line.

"It'll be huge for the team who wins [first-place] just so they get that rest before the playoffs start. Otherwise, to try and win a National Championship, we're going to go ten straight weekends, and that's a boatload for these kids to handle," Alberta head coach Scott Edwards said.

"We can't seem to get rid of each other—we're neck-and-neck all the time," added third-year Alberta forward Natalie Kiernan. "[Saskatchewan's] fun to play against—they're really competitive games—but it's always in the back of your mind that we're competing for the division title."

With four meetings per year, the Pandas and Huskies have developed a familiarity with each other, but Edwards denies calling it a rivalry, noting that Saskatchewan has clearly had the upper hand the past few seasons—the Huskies have taken ten of the past 14 meetings between the two teams—and that the teams haven't developed the animosity seen in other rivalries around the conference.

"I don't think it's a rivalry until you beat somebody. They're a well-coached team; they play hard basketball—they aren't cheap or dirty—it's really a class organization, so it's always fun when you can compete against people you respect,"

Edwards said.

In order to end the Huskies' three-year run atop the division, the Pandas must first slow their top duo of Sarah Crooks and Ashley Dutchak, who're averaging 25.9 and 19.9 points per game respectively this season—good for second and third in the conference. Crooks also surpassed the CIS women's record for career rebounding by grabbing her 1066th board against SFU this weekend.

"We need to make Dutchak work hard on both ends of the floor; make her the ball-handler; make her have to defend for 94 feet; make her have to work hard running off screens and tire her out," Edwards explained. "As for Crooks, we need to keep her out of the low-post as much as we can, get a hand up on her jump shot and really be physical with her so she doesn't get to the glass as well."

"We've got really good defenders on our team, so we'll definitely key on [Crooks and Dutchak]. It's just a matter of not giving Dutchak open looks from the three-point line and with Crooks, you just have to be physical with her; they're scorers, that's what they do, but we can keep them under wraps," Kiernan said.

On the other side of the ball, the Pandas need to turn around a struggling offence that has seen them average only 72.7 points per game since the break, down from 79.6 before it.

"We've got to get back to shooting the ball well. We haven't [done that] in a long, long time, and we've been in foul trouble every game this term. We need to get back to the good things we were doing: moving the ball well, playing good team offence and moving our feet a little better on defence," Edwards said.

The games tip off at 6pm on Friday and Saturday in the Main Gym.

Bears looking to clinch top spot, playoff bye versus rival Huskies

NICK FROST  
Sports Staff

The Golden Bears basketball team (12-4) will look to widen their division lead when they host the University of Saskatchewan Huskies (10-6) this weekend; something they failed to accomplish in their first matchup against the Saskatoonians.

After splitting their first series with the Huskies on a November road trip, Bears coach Don Horwood noted that his team's initial inconsistencies and mental lapses were the largest reasons for Alberta's turbulent play, which eventually spiralled into a three-game losing streak.

"The first night against Saskatchewan, I'd say we worked really hard and had a lot of intensity. But, then, on that second night, their intensity was really high and ours was just missing. The other thing that we were inconsistent with is our decision-making, which I think a large part of has to do, again, with intensity level—they kind of go hand-in-hand," Horwood said, noting that the problem has caused a lot of mental errors—turnovers, missed layups poor free-throw shooting—in his teams' four losses this season.

Since the game against Saskatchewan that spurred the losing skid, tenth-ranked Alberta has lost only twice—once to Calgary in non-conference play over Christmas and again to the Dinos on 6 January—and have opened a two-game lead on the Huskies atop the Central Division. Horwood believes that Alberta and Saskatchewan are, for the most part, evenly matched in their starting lineups which means he'll have to look to the bench to take the edge

off the visitors.

"Saskatchewan is a very solid team—they've got, as far as I'm concerned, the top player in the league right now: Andrew Spagrud," Horwood said of the Huskies' 6'7" star who is leading the conference with 24.4 points per game and 10.0 rebounds per game. "He can jump, he's really quick and his rebounding is fantastic. He's so quick to the boards that he can dominate simply from his rebounding. His team can get several second opportunities because of him, and he can feed it to one of outside shooters: Kyle Grant, Jordan Harbridge and Rejean Chabot."

It's those secondary players who have beaten the Bears in the past, as Chabot and Grant combined for 36 points in their November victory.

The stakes are high for both teams this weekend, as it's their last head-to-head matchup of the season and the best opportunity to secure home-court advantage and a bye through the first round of the playoffs. With a sweep, the Bears can move four wins ahead of the Huskies for first-place and ensure they receive that bye, while a pair of victories for the Green and White will put the Huskies in the driver's seat, level with the Bears but holding the head-to-head tiebreaker should both teams finish even at season's end.

"If we split, everything's still up in the air the following weekend, and the weekend after that, and Saskatchewan are coming in knowing that as well, that they'll have to win both to have a chance at finishing first," Horwood said. "Basically, we're down to the fine strokes—they're probably going to look at this as a playoff game, and we're looking on it the same way. It's that important to us."

Tipoff at the Main Gym goes both Friday and Saturday at 8pm.